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THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Abstract

Social work is, by excellence, a practical profession based on both common knowledge and experience as well as intuition and individual experience. Specialty practice is now recognized internationally as a key to providing the students necessary training to intervene in the complexities, uncertaines and challlenges situations encountered in working with the individual, family or community, and the existence of a methodological basis well-established, diverse and constantly updated will enable the practitioner to address any type of case with successfully. Drawing on research with students from the University of Pitesti, licensed and master study program of *Social Work*, the main aim of this study was to develop understanding of the social work students' experience of how theoretical and practical notions is taught in the lessons, how it is enacted operationally in practice and how learning and teaching in this field can be further developed. The study is based on the focus group method that specifically gathered qualitive data. The results of the study claim that the relationship between the way the practice is taught and how it is enacted into practice needs to be better understood in order to overcome a number of obstacles especially for the agencies. At the same time, the findings provide some reassurance about both the quality of university preparatory training on specialist practice and the learning oportunities and support, provided by agencies public and private, which provides social services at the community level.

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1. Introduction

The university is responsible for the normal development of society both in the short and long term. If certain social instances focus only on short or medium-term goals, the university has the task of carrying out its activities in accordance with distant goals or values (Pescaru, 2013). That's why, the postmodern demands of university education in a global context provide practical work with a fundamental importance. Future social workers need to develop not only knowledge, but also skills and values for professional interventions in solving or improving contemporary social issues.

Reflective practice is now recognized internationally as a key to ensuring that students are prepared to address the complexity, uncertainties and challenges encountered in contemporary work environments (Yip, 2006; Ruch, 2007), especially when it comes to work with people at risk. Social relationships between people, social interaction and past experiences direct people to the social environment, and for those who fail, social workers can intervene through specific methods. A social worker with social experience can hear, observe and listen to the individual in interaction situations and can intervene wherever this is required**.**

Schon's (1987) wording of the reflective practitioner as someone who is self-aware and able to both reflect and prepare for action by using a process of self-evaluation and critical analysis has an obvious appeal in the field of social work in which each practice situation is unique and routine formulaic prescriptions for intervention and complex decision making will not suffice (Heron, 2005). As a competing paradigm to the functionalist and technocratic underpinnings of competence-based learning, a reflective approach is, therefore, more compatible with the aim of creating adaptive learning structures and producing specialists competent of improving practice and reaching better decision-making through critical reflection on rules and processes (Fook, 2004; Lam et al., 2006).

In order to improve education in the field of social work and professional decision-making, the higher education standards in this area propose competence-based learning and evidence-based approaches to practice (Webb, 2001; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The curriculum of the social work program shows the importance of professional practice in vocational training, being considered as an integral component of academic and practical learning. Moreover, theories in general make it possible to try to understand the world in a conscious and systematic way and social work theories help social workers understand the complex and difficult situations of human life. As a result, the link between theory and practice in social work is a very strong one that underpins the formation of skills that are so necessary in this area.

Performance in this area can also be achieved only through the direct involvement of teachers who have the responsibility to guide, observe, supervise, monitor and evaluate all aspects of student theoretical and practical training, including their ability to play key roles in their work as social workers, and to reflect critically on each case. From the first year of study, students are encouraged to complete the *Practice Notebook*, where, besides the case load in practice, they should also mention their own reflections on their experiences in practice, critical elements and other aspects of the learning process. Another key element in the formation of future social workers is communication, not only for expanding our human horizons, but also to facilitate the development of learning abilities (cognitive and motivational skills), and that is way it should be a stimulating and encouraging one, and will lead to a successful and efficient personal and professional formation (Dumitru, 2018). As a result, it is imperative to develop a communication bridge

between the student, the teacher and the institutions that is likely to offer the opportunity to learn and acquire skills through reflective practice so that future social workers become true professionals.

2. Problem Statement

Considering that social care is, by and large, a practical profession based on both common knowledge and experience, as well as on individual intuition and experience, it becomes imperative to analyse how the theory acquired in courses and seminars is translated into specialized practical activities.

3. Research Questions

How is the students' experience related to the learning opportunities within the practice activities described?

How is the support of the practice teacher and organizations providing social services perceived in professional skills training?

What are learning outcomes based on reflective practice?

4. Purpose of the Study

This paper aims at understanding the students' experience of how they have learnt the theoretical and practical notions taught in the courses and how they have applied that knowledge in a reflective way; it also seeks to highlight how this concept is understood and adopted by social work agencies, the graduates' future employers, as most of these organizations are extremely dependent on rules, procedures and standards that can become real obstacles in the way of learning at both individual and organizational level.

5. Research Methods

In this study the qualitative methodological approach was the most appropriate way to address the research objectives. This consisted in the organising of two focus groups (of 10 students) from the Social Work specialization, licensed and master study program, from different stages during the final year.The adoption of this methodology allowed the collection of more in-depth qualitative data through the focus discussion group.

The investigation was explained to the participants, who were also informed that their participation is voluntary and that all pieces of information are anonymous. Studying the views of students from different years of study has facilitated the collection of data on their perceptions of theoretical training, tools used during practical learning, how to perceive the competences acquired at the end of the practical training as well as the results of the final evaluation.

The research method was the focus group, a method that seeks to understand and have a clear picture of certain perspectives and in this case the purpose of students' focus groups was to allow the exploration and analysis of the experiences and meanings attributed by students to practical experiences from the practice internships (Krueger & Casey, 2005). During the discussions, students were also encouraged to add new topics, including concerns derived from their practical experience. With the students' agreement, the data was recorded digitally and analysed so as to identify the subject categories and to create new themes

that resulted both from the students' experience following attendance at courses and seminars as well as from the practice internships.

5.1. Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this study is that it focused only on students' opinion (self-reporting) and did not include the point of view of other people involved in the educational process, or of those who were responsible for practice at the level of agencies or others who have had a significant impact on their experience.

Also, the evaluation of academic experiences is a complex issue that requires the correlation of several specialized studies in order to identify those tools to improve the quality of the educational act within the university and to increase the academic performance**.**

6. Findings

Students who participated in the study went on practice internships in various agencies subordinated to the General Directorate for Social Work and Child Protection, Argeș, especially in residential services providing protection and assistance to the children in risk situations and to the disabled children. The students' access of to these agencies was based on an agreement concluded between the University of Pitesti, namely the Social Assistance Program, and the General Directorate for Social Work and Child Protection Argeș, and before starting their activities the students signed a confidentiality agreement by means of which they were obliged not to disclose the information in the beneficiaries' files in order not to endanger the activity of the institution and the life of the beneficiaries.

The discussion' themes proposed in the focus groups followed to achive the research objectives and thus allowed to collect datas regarding to students' perceptions about their theoretical and practical training and their perceived level of reflective practice competence at the end of the course. The discussion focused, also, on the interaction between students and institutions where they made practice activities, in order to identify potential inconsistencies, so that, in the future, the learning process to be adjusted and become more efficient**.** Therefore, the main themes that emerged from this study are discussed below: student experience on learning opportunities in practice activities, skills training, learning outcomes, and last but not least relationship with practitioners from institutions.

The results showed that a large majority of students (80%) were satisfied or very pleased with the initial training on specialised practice. The percent of students who reported that they are competent or very competent in terms of their professional training (acquiring professional and transversal skills) in practice activities is 87%. Moreover, most students (93%) reported that they are very pleased with the opportunity to learn from practice, but there were some who did not agree with it.

Many of the students who participated in this study and said they received support from the agencies during the internship stressed the importance of personalized support from teachers both in terms of the suitability of teaching methods according to their individual learning style and needs, as well as in the process of co-ordinating practice. Their comments included the following:

I am not the kind of person who always tries to criticize, but rather want to understand things as I perceive them, and the practice teacher has managed to identify those methods that help me adjust where it is necessary in order to understand and practise this job.

Discussions with student focus groups also identified how the practice teacher encourages the process of acquiring experience during the various challenges that arise during practice, which are actually learning opportunities, and through the connections they make with the theory acquired in the lectures, to develop critical analysis and critical thinking skills.

The practice teacher and the Agency's practice tutor have supported and encouraged me to develop my self-awareness and reflective practice.

When you are in a challenging situation, you need to talk about what you perceived, felt and lived in that situation.

On the other hand, students who were dissatisfied with the knowledge gained during practice claimed the lack of support in gaining reflection from the practice teacher, the agency practice tutor and/or colleagues, and reported anxiety which they experienced as a result of negative feedback received in relation to their performance.

Students who had a positive relationship with the social worker within the agency were able to learn from their experience and also had the opportunity to observe good practices in the field of social work intervention.

Working with a professional social worker I had the chance to observe good practices, and now, if I were in a situation like this, I would be able to intervene so that the result would be a positive one for the client.

On the contrary, students who did not have a social worker actively involved in the practice activities felt disadvantaged and considered that their opportunities to learn through direct observation of professional practice were limited.

How do you know what to expect from a social worker if there is nobody there to guide you, to help you and explain what to do? It is important for as to have a model, like a future teacher, to have a good master beside him.

During the practice internship, the students had a practice notebook describing the methods of intervention, best practices and reflections on the problematic situations they had to observe or analyse with the agency's social worker. The focus group also analysed these student reflections and the need for these reports to highlight their knowledge of legislation, procedures and agency's policy. The vast majority considered this operation to be necessary, while some of them considered these reports an extra task involving an important time resource that could be used in a more constructive way (e.g. engaging in practical activities and education with the children in the placement centres). For them, practice should rather be a collaborative process that facilitates learning than a routine that tends to follow a procedure imposed by the practice teacher.

I think that is too much of a focus on. ... written work and not enough focus on the actual learning experience.

We had to complete too many details about the agency, about my opinion on various aspects ... and that is why I do it very superficially.... Most of the time there is no emphasis on what I feel like to think, to reflect....

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Several students have highlighted a discrepancy between the instrumental form of describing the reflection required by the teacher during practice, which usually focuses on the development of knowledge and understanding of the agency's procedure, and a more reflective focus on theories that are expected to be developed within academic training.

There is even a discrepancy between what we do in practice and how we are evaluated and the way lectures are approached.

Most lectures focus on theory rather than on practice, and when you have to work in the placement centre, you need to learn how to make an assessment, how to implement a protocol, how to complete different forms, how to identify and assess risks, how to identify methods of intervention and how to implement an intervention plan, etc…

7.   Conclusion

The results indicate that the students who participated in this study were a group with different levels of experience in the practice of social work. The conclusions provide some reassurance both on the quality of university education on reflective practice and on learning opportunities as well as on the support of agencies. The vast majority of students declared they had acquired the necessary skills in reflective practice, and teacher supervision facilitated the learning process and the formation of professional skills. Positive results in terms of reflective learning suggest that a high degree of education is important in achieving academic performance, particularly in the field of social work.

It is important to emphasize the importance of the social worker from the practice agency when making sure that the student is directly engaged in the experience of observing good professional practices and positive models to facilitate reflective learning and professional socialization. The students appreciated that they had support tailored to individual learning needs and could benefit from situations where reflective learning was encouraged by the practice teacher and their colleagues. This latter finding supports the idea that the practice teacher who personalized his/her approach has exerted his/her support to correlate the students' individual learning needs with their style and stage of development, these being more likely to actually allow for the development of their abilities on reflective practice (Gardiner, 1989). Moreover, the completion of the practice notebook facilitates professional development, being considered as a learning tool that leads to the increase of the quality of the practice activity and the achievement of the performance.

On the other hand, the study also found feelings of student dissatisfaction and frustration with the over-routine approach of learning through practice that may hinder the process of developing professional skills. The findings provided further evidence that engaging in reflection can be an anxiety-provoking and not always constructive experience (Litvack et al., 2010). There was a minority of students who were dissatisfied with how agencies worked with student practitioners and how the practice teacher and colleagues were involved. However, students' negative experiences of reflection seems to reflect the prevailing instrumental bias of working environments dominated by over-reliance on rules and procedures and supervision processes characterised by a focus on responsibility (Beddoe, 2010; Munro, 2010). The main challenge faced by social workers in agencies is to develop an organizational culture in which reflective practice can develop. But, for this, it is necessary to change highly rooted attitudes and practices of the staff that can be considered real obstacles to development. Another challenge would be to develop a

more integrated model of reflective practice, which meets the needs of both academics and employers. The proposals for closer working partnerships between academic institutions and employers in Romania will provide new opportunities to explore such issues and develop a shared agenda to improve practice.

Social work operates in a complex area, constantly changing, permanent targeting the new problems generated by the evolution of the social process. It is obvious that the new socio-economic, political and organizational context in which the profession of social work placed, has changed significantly, imposing on the social assistant new capacities of professional actions (Goian & Trancă, 2015). That's why it is important to identify ways to improve the training of professionals in the field of social work, to find ways to support reflective practices and change professional attitudes at all levels that currently support an excessive dependence on rules and procedures. Developing a higher level of coherence in the practicalisation of reflective practice in academic and practical learning would be a major step forward and will help provide a stronger basis for continuing professional development.

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